

Spiritual Being and the Powers of Perception: The First Latin Commentators on De Anima.

In his paper 'Aquinas on "Spiritual Change" in Perception' Myles Burnyeat invokes the support of Thomas Aquinas in his debate with Richard Sorabji over the nature of perception and the various issues raised by Aristotle's account of the transmission of information about the sensible world to the sense organs and then on to the understanding. Burnyeat claims at one point in his paper that a knowledge of the historical origins of the notion of spirituality which are central to Aquinas' account of perception may be a hinderance to understanding what is at stake. This I suspect has more to do with the fact that when Burnyeat wrote little was known about the source of the concepts of 'spiritual being' and 'spiritual change' than with a considered position on the history of philosophy. Now much more is known and in particular we have access to what were probably the first extensive lectures on Aristotle's *de Anima* given after the prohibition on teaching the *libri naturales* lapsed in Paris in the 1230's. The soon to be published commentary on *de Anima* by Richard Rufus contains in its treatment of Book II an extensive and sophisticated account of the powers of perception and of the nature of spiritual being and change developed in confronting the traditional Augustinian account of perception with the newly recovered Aristotelian theory read in conjunction with Averroes' commentary on it. Ironically the history which Burnyeat thought we might to our advantage ignore already includes an anticipation of his debate with Sorabji in which Rufus's advocacy of 'spiritualism' - the position which Burnyeat argues for - is opposed by Roger Bacon who, like Sorabji, argues for a materialist account of perception. In this paper I will introduce this early debate over the nature of perception and connect it more generally to the discussion of potentiality and power developed in the earliest Latin commentaries on Aristotle's natural philosophy showing, I hope, that far from being a hinderance an understanding of the history of 'spiritual change' is essential if we are to properly evaluate it as an interpretation of Aristotle's account of the interaction of the soul with the world.